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## **Exploring the Influence of Reporting Delay on Criminal Justice Outcomes: Comparing Child and Adult Reporters of Childhood Sexual Abuse**

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## **Exploring the Influence of Reporting Delay on Criminal Justice Outcomes – Comparing Child and Adult Reporters of Childhood Sexual Abuse**

### **Abstract**

This study utilizes data from a large sample of police records to examine the relationship between reporting delay and pre-trial criminal justice outcomes for child and adult reporters of CSA. Analyses show that the presence and length of reporting delay significantly influences outcomes for child reporters, with teenagers particularly benefitting from immediate reporting. Length of delay was not a significant influence on outcomes for adult female reporters with the longest delays having the highest probability of detection of all adult groups. Conversely adult males had much lower probabilities of case detection. A trend for increased delay to increase the likelihood of detection for those aged 0-6 years when the offence occurred was also apparent. The implications for criminal justice professionals are discussed.

**Keywords:** pre-trial decision making, case detection, historic abuse

### **Introduction**

It is well evidenced that child sexual abuse (CSA) is a global problem of considerable extent affecting the lives of millions of children each year (Stoltenborgh, Van IJzendoorn, Euser & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). Equally well evidenced is that, despite the frequency of child maltreatment across a range of populations, many children do not disclose abuse during childhood and, even in adulthood, some may never tell (Sas & Cunningham, 1995; London, Bruck, Ceci & Shuman, 2005; London, Bruck, Wright & Ceci, 2008;). Even when disclosure does take place only a minority of cases come to the attention of child protection services or the police, often many years after the abuse occurred (delayed reporting), (London et al., 2005 & 2008; Saas & Cunningham, 1995; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones & Gordon, 2003, Connolly & Read, 2006; Feist, Ashe, McPhee & Wilson, 2007; Author, 2008). For example, Connolly & Read's (2006) examination of cases referred for prosecution in Canada noted an average reporting delay of 14 years with two thirds falling within a range of 5-22 years and some extending to 3-4 decades.

Connolly & Read (2006) note that although delayed reporting has serious implications for legal processes in terms of admissibility of evidence, there remains a paucity of empirical research on the retention of emotional or traumatic childhood events recalled after many years. They also draw attention to the lack of research investigating the characteristics of adult reports of historic CSA. Indeed the literature examining impact of reporting delay on CSA legal outcomes generally is scant with the limited available research tending to focus on the court stage of the criminal justice system. This suggests that delays in full disclosure negatively impact on ratings of defendant guilt and belief in the alleged victim (Yozwiak, Golding & Marcil, 2004) while shorter reporting delay leads to significantly higher guilt ratings and

lengthier sentence recommendations (Pozzulo, Dempsey & Crescini, 2010). However, research with real life trial cases (Read, Connolly & Welsh, 2006) has demonstrated that reporting delay predicts verdict in judge only trials of delayed and historic child abuse trials but not in jury trials. Analysis of judicial assessments of complainant credibility also indicates that adults may be viewed more positively than children even when all the complainants were children when the alleged offense occurred (Connolly, Price & Gordon, 2010).

These studies offer valuable insight into how reporting delay can influence successful prosecution. They suggest that the relationship between delay and case outcomes is not a straightforward one and might be mediated by the age of the victim and whether are not they are a child or adult when they come into contact with the legal system. However, given that only minority of reports of sexual crime against children proceed pass the investigative stage of the criminal justice system and even fewer proceed to trial or subsequent conviction, they are unlikely to be representative of cases reported to the police in the first instance (Feist et al., 2007; Author, 2008; Stroud, Martens & Barker, 2000; Gallagher and Pease; 2000).

To date, only a small numbers of studies have addressed this gap through comparison of cases assessed by police and/or prosecutors as having sufficient evidence to prosecute with those that don't meet this threshold (Feist et al., 2007; Author, 2008). Both Feist et al. (2007) and the Author (2008) specifically focused on the relationship between case characteristics and case outcomes but produced conflicting results. Feist et al., (2007) found rape cases involving adults who delayed reporting significant were less likely to result in an offender being charged, summonsed or cautioned but no significant association for child cases (under 16 years). On the

other hand, previous research by the author (2008) found a significant association between reporting delay and an offender being charged, summonsed or cautioned in both child and adult cases.

Although neither study looked at potential differences in outcomes for children reporting sexual offences compared to adults reporting childhood sexual offences (i.e. the child/adult status of the reporter), the author (2008) noted a curvilinear relationship between reporting delay and outcomes with both those who reported immediately and those who reported much later being more likely to result in an offender being charged, cautioned or summonsed. It was hypothesised that this was because those who report the same day were likely have the greatest amount of physical evidence, whilst those who report later were more likely to be reporting on historical cases which involve other witnesses or because, as an adult, they appeared more credible a witness.

However, to date no analysis has been undertaken examining the specific impact of age at report, age at offence occurrence and the length of reporting delay on pre-trial criminal justice outcomes in relation to child and adult reporters of childhood sexual abuse. Such research is necessary to better understand decision-making within the criminal justice system as a whole rather than focusing solely on trial outcomes. It can also expand our knowledge as to how and why different groups may 'drop out' of the legal system in the earlier, pre-trial stages of the process.

### **The present study**

The present study extends previous research in this area by investigating the influence of age at report, age at offence occurrence and the length of reporting delay on criminal justice outcomes for both child and adult reporters of sexual victimisation during childhood.

Two specific research questions are addressed:

- 1] Does reporting delay predict criminal justice outcomes for child and adult reporting groups?
- 2] Does reporting delay have a differential impact on different child and adult groups?

## **Method**

The study involved quantitative analysis of data relating to 2079 sexual offences recorded by the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010. Northern Ireland [NI] is a part of the United Kingdom and is situated at the northeast of the island of Ireland. According to the mid-year populations estimates for 2010 (NISRA, 2010), its population is approximately 1,799,392 with 433,797 (24%) being under the age of 18. Crimes across the UK, including Northern Ireland, are recorded in accordance with strict counting rules issued by the UK Home Office (HO, 2010) and are counted on the basis of crimes rather than offenders (i.e. one victim one crime). The Counting Rules stipulate that:

‘An incident will be recorded as a crime (notifiable offence)

1. for offences against an identified victim if, on the balance of probability:
  - (a) the circumstances as reported amount to a crime defined by law (the police will determine this, based on their knowledge of the law and counting rules), and
  - (b) there is no credible evidence to the contrary.’ (pi)

Where an offence is recorded by PSNI a variety of victim and characteristics are available: victim gender; victim age when the offence (1st) occurred (years); victim age when the offence was reported (years); delay between reporting and occurrence (days); offence type and subcategory; and the Police District where the offence was reported (8 in total). It also includes information on whether the crime was 'detected' or not. Where an offence is recorded as 'detected' by the PSNI additional case characteristics such as offender gender, offender age (age groups), offender relationship to the victim and method of detection are also recorded.

### **key definitions:**

Child: aged 0-17 years inclusive

Sexual Offence type: based on four classifications; rape/attempted rape; sexual assault of a child/sexual activity with a child; indecent exposure; and other sexual offences.

Detected - Detected crimes are those cases which are deemed by the police and, in the majority of offences, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), to have sufficient evidence to have a reasonable chance of securing a conviction in court.

### **Statistical analysis**

The data was analyzed using SPSS Version 19.0. A dichotomous detected/not detected variable was used as the outcome variable and comparisons between outcomes and all available offence characteristic variables were made using chi-squared tests. An additional 'Age at Report/Delay' variable was developed to encapsulate the child/adult status of the reporter,

whether they were the same age when they reported as when the offence occurred and the presence of delay. This was coded into four groups:

- children who reported immediately (within 48hrs) and, thus, were the same age when they reported the offence as when it occurred (Child, same age at report, no delay)
- Children who did not report immediately but reported within the year in which the offence occurred and were, thus, the same age when they reported as when the offence occurred (Child, same age, delay of < 1 year)
- Children who reported a year or more after the offence took place and were, thus, older when they reported than when the offence occurred (Child, older when reported, delay > 1 year)
- Adults reporting sexual offences which occurred during childhood (Adult reports - delay)

As adult reporters were, by definition delayed reporters, analysis was conducted across two groups, adult reporters and child reporters, to facilitate examining the influence of the degree of delay on case outcomes. Case characteristics with p value < 0.05 were regarded as significant and entered into a logistic regression model to test how they predicted case outcome (detection). Interactions between the variables were also tested within the logistic regression model to identify differential probabilities of a case being detected within different groups.

### **Ethical considerations**

Formal ethical approval was not required. However, a formal information sharing agreement was drawn up between the NSPCC and PSNI which specified the NSPCC's



responsibilities in relation to the storage, analysis and dissemination of the data. This required formal agreement to act in accordance with legal data protection principles and, accordingly, the data was stored on a password protected secure IT system. It also required compliance with the PSNI disclosure policy of not publishing any text or tables relating to cells of 3 or less.

### **Sample Characteristics**

Overall a quarter of the sample (n=2079) involved adults reporting childhood sexual offences and 75% involved children reporting sexual offences.

#### **Child Reporters**

Close to one in five children were recorded as victims of rape/attempted rape while 72% were the victims of either a sexual assault or an offence involving sexual activity with a child (see Table 1). Sixty three per cent of child victims were teenagers when the offence (1<sup>st</sup>) occurred and 12% involved very young children aged 0-6 years.

Seventy per cent of the child victims were teenagers when the offence was reported, 9% were aged 0-6 years and 21% were aged 7-12 years. Fifteen per cent of child victims were male. Overall, 52.4% of child victims reported the offence immediately (same or next day), 31.4% within the year, giving a total of 84% of children who were the same age when they reported the offence as when it occurred. Sixteen per cent of child reporters delayed reporting by more than one year and hence, were older than when the offence occurred. The proportion of sexual offences recorded across the 8 NI Police Districts varied from 10% to 18%.

**Adult Reporters**

Thirty per cent of adults reporting a childhood sexual offence were recorded as victims of rape/attempted rape while 70% were the victims of either a sexual assault or an offence involving sexual activity with a child (see Table 2). Twenty one per cent of adults were teenagers when the offence occurred or, if related to a series of offences, when the 1<sup>st</sup> offence occurred, and 30% involved very young children aged 0-6 years.

All adult reporters were by definition delayed reporters with a majority, 87%, involving a delay of 11 or more years. Twenty eight per cent of victims were male. The proportion of adults reporting childhood sexual offences across the 8 NI Police Districts varied from 6% to 17% and total of 14% of sexual offences reported by adults were detected

**Bivariate Analysis****Child Reporters**

Four case characteristics showed a significant relationship with case detection for child reporters (see Table 1): age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence, age at offence report, age at report/delay and police district the offence was reported in. Results for both the ‘age at offence occurrence’ and ‘age at offence report’ variables suggested a curvilinear relationship with case detection with victims in the 7-12 year old categories having the highest levels of detection, 0-6 years the lowest, followed by teenagers.

**Table 1: Relationship between Case Characteristics and Case Detection: Child Reporters**

	Total		Detected		N	$\chi^2$	df	Sig
	%	No	No	%				
<b>Offence Type</b>								
Rape/attempted rape	312	18.9	63	20.2	1654	.251	1	.616
Sexual assault/sexual activity	1188	71.8	225	18.9				
Indecent exposure	126	7.6	23	18.3				
Other sexual offences	28	1.7	7	25.0				
<b>Age When Offence Occurred (1<sup>st</sup> offence)</b>								
0-6 years	203	12.3	20	9.9	1654	21.031	2	.000
7-12 years	418	25.3	105	25.1				
13-17 years	1033	62.5	193	18.7				
<b>Age When Offence Reported</b>								
0-6 years	145	8.8	12	8.3	1654	21.327	2	.000
7-12 years	348	21.0	90	25.9				
13-17 years	1160	70.1	212	18.6				
<b>Age at Report/Delay</b>								

Child, same age at report, no delay	866	52.4	187	21.6	1654	6.579	2	.037
Child, same age, delay of < 1 year	519	31.4	87	16.8				
Child, older when reported, delay > 1 year	269	16.3	44	16.4				
<b>Gender of victim</b>								
Female	1413	85.4	275	19.5	1654	.251	1	.616
Male	241	14.6	43	17.8				
<b>Police District</b>								
A	165	10.0	32	19.2	1654	18.922	7	.008
B	159	9.6	33	20.8				
C	204	12.3	44	21.6				
D	238	14.4	44	18.5				
E	221	13.4	22	10.0				
F	157	9.5	40	25.5				
G	293	17.7	54	18.4				
H	217	13.1	48	22.6				

### Adult Reporters

Two case characteristics showed a significant relationship with case detection for adult reporters (see Table 2): age at offence occurrence and victim gender. The results indicated that adult reporters who had been victimized between the ages of 0-6 years and 7-12 year old categories had similar high levels of detections compared with those who had been victimized when teenagers. Females also had significantly higher levels of detection than males.

**Table 2: Relationship between Case Characteristics and Case Detection: Adult Reporters**

	Total		Detected		N	$\chi^2$	df	Sig
	No	%	No	%				
Offence Type+								
Rape/attempted rape	125	29.8	22	17.6	420	1.465	1	.226
Sexual assault/sexual activity	295	70.2	37	12.5				
Age When Offence Occurred (1 <sup>st</sup> offence)								
0-6 years	127	29.9	21	16.5	425	6.906	2	.032
7-12 years	208	48.9	34	16.3				
13-17 years	90	21.2	5	5.6				
Length of Reporting Delay								

1-5 years	22	5.2	3	13.6	425	.126	2	.939
6-10 years	33	7.8	4	12.1				
11+ years	370	87.1	53	14.3				
<b>Gender of victim</b>								
Female	305	71.8	50	16.4	425	3.973	1	.046
Male	120	28.2	10	8.3				
<b>Police District</b>								
A	50	11.8	4	8.0	425	11.355	7	.124
B	26	6.1	4	15.4				
C	72	16.9	13	18.1				
D	52	12.2	6	11.5				
E	65	15.3	12	18.5				
F	69	16.2	15	21.7				
G	59	13.9	4	6.8				
H	32	7.5	2	6.3				

+ categories of indecent exposure and other sexual offences were excluded due to small cell counts

++ 33% of the cells had an expected count of less than 5.

### **Multivariate analysis**

#### **Child Reporters**

To confirm the curvilinear relationship between ‘victim age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence’ and ‘detection’ suggested by the bivariate analysis, logistic regression was conducted with the continuous ‘age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence’ variable and ‘detection’ and ‘age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence squared’ and ‘detection’ to compare results, as recommended by (Ormes and Combs-Orme, 2009). The analysis showed significantly better model fit using age at offence occurrence squared [ $\chi^2(2, n=1654)=18.166, p\leq 0.005$ ], confirming the curvilinear nature of the relationship with detection.

Based on these results, the categorical ‘victim age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence’ variable, the ‘police district’ and ‘age at report/delay’ variable which identified the child/adult status of the reporter, their age at report and length of delay, were entered into a logistic regression model to measure their influence on detection levels. Although significant at the bivariate level of analysis, ‘age at offence report’ was not entered as both ‘age at offence report’ and ‘age at report/delay’ were both essentially measures of reporting delay. Additionally ‘age at offence report’ was also highly correlated with ‘age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence’ [ $r(1652)=0.824, p\leq 0.005$ ], necessitating exclusion.

The omnibus test of coefficients indicated a significantly better fit when the three predictor variables were entered into the logistic regression model ( $\chi^2(11, n=1654)=51.205, p\leq 0.005$ ). The results showed that victims of sexual offences who were aged 0-6 years when the offence occurred were less likely than teenagers to have their cases detected after controlling for

the effect of delay and police district (see Table 3). Victims aged 7-12 years, on the other hand, were 1.58 times more likely to have their cases detected than teenagers after controlling for delay. Child victims who reported immediately were 1.58 times more likely to have their cases detected than those who reported more than a year after the offence occurred, after controlling for influence of age when the offence happened and the police district the offence was reported in. There was no significant difference between those who reported within the year and those who reported after one year in terms of detection, after controlling of the effect of age at offence occurrence and police district.

**Table 3: Final Logistic Regression Predicting Case Detection for Child Reporters (N = 1654)**

Predictor	$\beta$	SE	Wald	p	Odds Ratio
<b>Victim Age at Occurrence</b>					
0-6 yrs V 13-17 yrs	-.640	.256	6.259	.012	.527 (.319, .871)
7-12 years V 13-17 yrs	.461	.148	9.770	.002	1.586 (1.188, 2.118)
<b>Age Difference at report (Delay)</b>					
Same age (immediate reporter) V Different age	.456	.201	5.168	.023	1.578 (1.065,



(report 1+ yrs later)						2.337)
Same age (report within	.095	.218	.192	.661	1.100 (.718,	
year) V Different age						1.685)
(report 1+ yrs later)						

Note - Coefficients adjusted for police district

Further analysis revealed significant interaction between the ‘age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence’ and the ‘age at report/delay’ variable indicating reporting delay had a differential impact on different age groups ( $\chi^2(15, n=1654)= 60.597, p\leq 0.005$ ]. Examination of the mean predicted probabilities derived from this interaction model (see Table 4) highlighted victims aged 0-6 years as having some of the lowest probabilities of having their case detected; those reporting immediately had a 9% chance of their case being detected, a figure which fell to 6% where reporting was delayed but occurred within the year and rose to 11% where the delay was more than one year. Those aged 7-12 years when the offence occurred had some of the highest probabilities with those reporting immediately having a 28% chance of their case being detected, a figure which fell to 25% where reporting was delayed but occurred within the year and to 22% where the delay was more than one year. The probability of victims aged 13-17 years having their case detected decreased as reporting delay increased with those reporting immediately having a 21% chance of their case being detected, a figure which fell to 16% where reporting was delayed but occurred within the year and fell further to 12% where the delay was more than one year.

**Table 4: Mean Predicted Probability and 95% Confidence Intervals by Victim Age at Offence occurrence and Age at Report/delay**

Victim age at offence occurrence	Age at Report/Delay		
	Same age – no delay	Same age – report within year of occurrence	Older – report 1+ years after occurrence
<b>0-6 years</b>	10 (9, 11)	6 (5, 8)	12 (11, 12)
<b>7-12 years</b>	28 (27, 29)	25 (23, 26)	22 (21, 23)
<b>13- 17 years</b>	21 (21, 22)	16 (16, 17)	11 (10, 12)

### Adult Reporters

As with child reporter analysis, logistic regression comparing the continuous ‘age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence’ and the ‘age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence squared’ showed significantly better model fit using ‘age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence squared [ $\chi^2(2, n=425)=6.992, p=0.030$ ]], confirming the curvilinear nature of the relationship with detection. Based on these results, the categorical ‘age at (1<sup>st</sup>) offence occurrence and ‘gender’ was entered into a logistic regression model to measure its impact on detection for adult reporters.

The omnibus test of coefficients indicated a significantly better fit when the two predictor variables were entered into the logistic regression model ( $[\chi^2(10, n=425)=26.279, p=0.003]$ ). Adult victims of sexual offences which occurred when they were 0-6 years were 3.4 times more likely to have their cases detected than those whose offences occur when they were teenagers,

after controlling for the effect of gender (see Table 5). Adult victims who were aged 7-12 years when the offence occurred were almost 4 times more likely to have their cases detected than teenagers. Female victims were 2.3 times more likely to have their cases detected than males, after controlling for the effect of age at offence occurrence.

**Table 5: Final Logistic Regression Predicting Case Detection for Adult Reporter (N = 425)**

Predictor	$\beta$	SE	Wald	p	Odds Ratio
<b>Victim Age at Occurrence</b>					
0-6 yrs V 13-17 yrs	1.321	.528	6.260	.012	3.747(1.331, 10.548)
7-12 years V 13-17 yrs	1.358	.507	7.170	.007	3.887 (1.439, 10.502)
<b>Gender: Female V Male</b>	.828	.376	4.843	.028	2.289 (1.095, 4.785)

Note - Coefficients adjusted for police district

Further analysis revealed significant interaction between the two predictor variables, indicating reporting delay had a differential impact on different age groups [ $\chi^2$  (12, n=425)=30.234, p=0.003)]. Examination of the mean predicted probabilities derived from this interaction model showed that that adult females reporting offences which occurred when aged 0-6 years and 7-12 years had a 20% predicted probability of having their case detected (see Table 6). This was much higher than for males who had a probability of have their case detected of 7% for those age 0-6 years when the offence occurred and 9% when they were aged 7-12 years. Adult males who reported an offence which happened when they were teenagers had a similar

low probability for case detection of 10%. For adult females the probability of detection for offences which occurred when they were teenagers was considerably lower than for younger female offence occurrence age groups as well as being lower than for adult male teenagers at 4%.

**Table 6 : Mean Predicted Probability and 95% Confidence Intervals by Victim Age at Offence Occurrence and Victim Gender – Adult Interaction Model**

Victim age at offence occurrence	Gender	
	Male	Female
	Mean	Mean
<b>0-6 years</b>	7 (6, 8)	20 (18, 21)
<b>7-12 years</b>	9 (8, 10)	20 (19, 22)
<b>13- 17 years</b>	10 (7, 12)	4 (4, 5)

### Discussion

This study sought to extend previous research by examining the relationship between reporting delay, child/adult status of the reporter and case outcomes at the earlier pre-trial stage of the criminal justice system. The findings confirm that reporting delay has a complex relationship with the age the child was at offence occurrence and the age they present to the police. Age at offence (1<sup>st</sup>) occurrence independently predicted case outcomes for both child and adult reporters, degree of delay (immediate, < 1 year, > 1 year) for child reporters and victim gender for adult reporters only.

The study showed reporting delay could actually increase the odds of case detection in child cases involving offences which occurred when the victim was very young. Children aged 0-6 years reporting either immediately or within the year of offence occurrence were notably disadvantaged in terms of case outcomes. The ability of children who experience early onset abuse may be hampered by the limits of their memory and cognitive abilities to understand what is happening to them (Lippert et al., 2009). This presents particular difficulties in interviewing such children in a developmentally appropriate manner while at the same time obtaining sufficient evidence for a successful prosecution. The use of structured interview protocols such as NICHD have been shown to be effective in increasing the amount and quality of information retrieved by recall from all children, including very young children (Lamb et al., 2007).

On the other hand, the implications for admissibility of evidence and memory recall in historic CSA cases involving adults noted by Connolly (2006) did not appear to be borne out by the findings, at least not for women. Indeed, adult females reporting offences which occurred when they were very young, aged 0-6 years, and hence where delay was the longest, had the highest probability of detection of all child and adult groups who experienced sexual violence within the 0-6 age group. This would indicate that the adult status of female reporters has an important influence in decisions to prosecute sexual abuse which occurred when they were very young children.

Conversely, male adult reporters who experienced sexual violence when age 0-6 years had the lowest probability of case detection. Some of this variation may be attributable to differences in the offences committed against male and female children as well as differing relationships with the offender. For example, previous research has found that sexual abuse involving boys is more likely to be extrafamilial than abuse involving girls or involve a female

offender (Finkelhor et al., 1990). However, the finding that adult females were three times as likely to have their cases detected than males who experienced sexual offences in the same age group is notable and is suggestive of variation in the criminal justice response to adult male reporters of child sexual abuse which needs to be further investigated by both researchers and criminal justice practitioners

Teenagers emerged as the group most negatively affected by reporting delay with the probability of detection decreasing from 21% for immediate teenage reporters to 11% for those reporting a year or more after offence occurrence, a very different pattern compared to younger age groups. Whilst the precise circumstances of these offences and the relationship between the offenders is unknown, it is likely that many of these offences involved a social or 'dating' context and were committed by offenders known to the victim (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; Cawson, Wattam, Brooker & Kelly, 2001). Jury based research has also highlighted how jurors tend to find younger children more credible because they see them as being trustworthy, and cognitively unable to fabricate false allegations whereas, with older victims, they are more likely to attribute responsibility for the sexual assault to the child (Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; Bottoms, Golding, Stevenson, Wiley & Yozwiak, 2007). Legal arguments around the issue of consent will also have much more relevance to the teenage age group as well the potential presence of other factors such as alcohol consumption or drug use. These various factors likely combine to make reporting delay a significantly more important issue for teenager victims compared with younger child victims in terms of evidence gathering and establishing credibility. Equally, the adult status of the reporter appeared to have no positive benefit with adult females reporting sexual violence in their teenage years having the lowest detection probability at 4%.

### **Limitations**

While every effort has been made to ensure a rigorous and systematic approach to this analysis, there are important limitations to this study which should be noted. Firstly, one of the limitations of the present study is the lack of data in relation to offender details. The literature highlights that the victim/offender relationship not only has a strong relationship with reporting delay (Connolly and Read, 2006) but that it is associated with higher levels of victim withdrawal where the offenders is a partner or ex partner and higher rates of a case being heard at court where the offender is a parent or relation of the victims (Feist et al., 2007; Author, 2008). Secondly, the nature of the analysis and the range of the variables included are, by necessity, limited to those recorded by police information systems and it should be recognized that a broader and more complex range of variables are likely to be related to cases outcomes.

It should also be noted that the sample relates to alleged offences, many of which will not have proceeded to court. As such, there is no objective measure of ascertaining the degree to which these reflect actual experiences of victimization. Arguably detected offences provide a high degree of confirmation that a crime was indeed committed, representing as they do, those offences in which the police and prosecutors believe there is enough evidence to take forward a prosecution. The author takes the view that to operate such a high level of corroboration would be to ignore the varied reasons for case attrition and the role reporting delays clearly plays in detection rates.

Despite these limitations, this study, uniquely, provides information on the presence of delay and degree of delay and the child/adult status of the reporter on case detection, highlighting this as an area for further study and investigation

### **Conclusion**

Intuitively we might expect delays in reporting sexual offences to reduce the likelihood of prosecution and conviction and the relationship to be a linear one with longer delays further reducing the likelihood of prosecution. However, court based research has suggested a more complex interplay between the child/adult status of the reporter, the length of delay and subsequent prosecution and/or conviction. This study confirmed the influence of these variables at the pre-trial stages of the criminal justice process, highlighting those victimized as teenagers as the group most disadvantaged by reporting delay. This suggests the importance of raising awareness of sexual violence within this age group and developing initiatives to increase youth confidence in the system response and encourage earlier reporting.

While teenagers were disadvantaged by reporting delay the results showed that delay may actually be of benefit in terms of criminal justice outcomes for those who experience sexual abuse at a very young age (0-6 years) with the longer the delay the higher the level of detection. While the most important outcome of any abuse report is that the abuse stops and the victim is provided with safety and support, criminal prosecution is also important element of the future safeguarding of other children. While the difficulties inherent in interviewing and obtaining evidence from very young children are well recognized structured protocols have shown to be of benefit and should be considered within the UK context as a way of developing a more equitable justice response to very young victims.

It is particularly interesting to note that adult females reporting an offence which occurred when aged 0-6 years had a higher probability of case detection than any of the child groups reporting an offence in this age group. Given that these adult cases involved the longest



reporting delay, often two or more decades, this is suggestive of an adult bias in the system response. The results also point to a gender bias with adult males being disadvantaged by reporting delay in a way that adult females are not. While this may, in part, be attributable to differences in offence characteristics not measured within this study, it is worthy of further investigation by researchers and criminal justice practitioners.

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